

**Rehabilitation Services Council for the Blind and Visually Impaired  
May, 13, 2005 Meeting Minutes**

The meeting was called to order by Lawrence Luck. Ruby Polk called the roll. Those present were:

Clay Berry, Donna Borgmeyer, Bill Burris, Ceil Callahan, Michael Fester, Debbi Head, Beverly Kaskadden, Mike Merrick, Daniel Nellis, James Pelfrey, Ruby Polk, Jim Sucharski, April Tooloze, John Wunder, Brian Wekamp, Mark Laird

Those not present were:

Russell McCampbell, Mary Kay Savage, Abby Pfefferkorn and Stanley Grimsley

Naomi Soule from the South Office was introduced and addressed the Council. She reported that the staff currently serves nearly 400 active cases. Her office is actively involved in a program to heighten community awareness with regard to difficulties in transportation access and services. They are also actively engaged with the career centers in providing training and consultation to the staff so that the clients referred will have a positive experience. The previous success of the 'job club' in this office will result in reactivating the program. Naomi Soule identified a number of occupations and locations of client employment. One of these occupations drew particular comment because it was in a highly visible location, i.e. fast food, with public contact by the client.

Benard Elliott, from the North Office, was introduced to the Council and identified a number of different occupations which are not stigmatized as the sole province or purview of blind clients. He reported that his office is in the process of working with clients to identify appropriate vocational objectives during the initial intake interview. In addition to all of his other activities, Mr. Elliott is planning a statewide student conference to be held in St. Louis in August. He indicated that there would be upwards of 175 students participating in this program. This will be a part of the transition process preparing students to adapt to the demands of college lifestyle. He also recounted his efforts in his attempts to develop in-state training services thereby eliminating the need to send Missouri clients out of the state.

The guest speaker for this business meeting was John Thompson of the Lighthouse for the Blind. He provided us with a number of statements regarding the Lighthouse's activities. Mr. Thompson stated that the purpose was employment. Preference is given to employing blind and visually impaired individuals as long as they are qualified. The only preferential treatment in which the Lighthouse is engaged is that of hiring a blind candidate over a sighted candidate if 'all other things being equal.' The Lighthouse currently employs 110 individuals, 56 of whom are visually impaired. The average income per hour is just under \$9. All employees participate in a single benefits package offered to all. The visually impaired are represented in both wage and salaried positions. The

Lighthouse does not receive any subsidies or grants. All of their funding is from the profits they make in manufacturing and services. This particular Lighthouse is a competitive business with product sales of approximately \$5 million per year. Its only concession to the blind and visually impaired is that they make the manufacturing process adaptable and accessible for the visually impaired.

Mike Merrick reported on the status of the satisfaction survey. The survey has not been sent out partly due to the problems connected with email for the executive director. However, the surveys and a preliminary report will be available for the August meeting. Mr. Merrick also distributed the client handbook which was proposed in 2001 and is currently available.

The question was asked of Mike Fester what the import of the closing of the regional Rehab Services Administrative offices would be. He indicated that this may mean that there would be pressure at the federal level to begin consolidating departments and services. The question was also asked as to whether this would diminish the depth and availability of services.

Mr. Fester indicated that this could be a possibility because of the lack of familiarity with specialized populations and the services which they would require. He also stated that there is a Missouri State Government Review Commission whose purpose is to reduce waste and duplication within State agencies. Because of this activity, there may also be pressure towards the merging and consolidating of services at the State level. The same question was presented as to whether this would have a deleterious effect on the services to a specialized population. Mike Fester agreed that this was a possibility.

After considerable discussion, a motion was made by Bill Burris, seconded by Jim Pelfrey, and was unanimously approved that the Council write letters addressing the issue of services for the blind and visually impaired community to both federal and state officials who would be involved with and concerned about this issue. At the federal level, correspondence should be directed to the Secretary of Education, Senators and Congressmen from Missouri and at the state level, the governor, local representatives and the Missouri State Government Review Commission.

Mike Fester provided us with the names of the Commission Members to be contacted. Two committees will focus on issues that affect services to the blind and visually impaired. One is Social Services and its members are Peter Kinder (Lt. Governor), Ron Dittmore (Healthcare consultant from Heartland Health), and Sharon Rohrbach (C.E.O of the Nurses for Newborns Foundation.) The other committee is Education and its members are Charles McClain (Interim Head, Columbia Independent Schools), Kathleen Osborn (Executive Director of the St. Louis Regional Business Council), and CiCi Rojas (President of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce).

Contacts should be directed to:

Missouri State Government Review Commission

Office of Administration  
Division of Budget and Planning  
124 Capitol Building  
P.O. BOX 809  
Jefferson City, MO 65102  
Tel: 573-751-2345  
Fax: 573-526-4811

The web site for the Missouri State Review Commission was provided ([www.review.mo.gov](http://www.review.mo.gov)).

There will be hearings related to the activities of this Commission and they will be held:

June 17, 2005 - 9:00 a.m.	St. Louis
June 24, 2005 - 9:00 a.m.	St. Joseph
June 24, 2005 - 2:00 p.m.	Kansas City
July 15, 2005 - 9:00 a.m.	Springfield
July 22, 2005 - 9:00 a.m.	Cape Girardeau
July 29, 2005 - 9:00 a.m.	Kirksville

Meeting locations have not yet been determined.

A number of Council members strongly urged that each member of the Council write a personal letter addressing their individual concerns and issues regarding the services for the blind and visually impaired. The question was asked how many states had separate service divisions for the blind and visually impaired. At this time there are twenty-eight (28) states with separate divisions or commissions.

Mike Fester continued with his report on the Rehabilitation Services Division. He indicated that rehab services needed to work more with the career centers to assist and train them to work with our specialized population. The budget process was concluded with no significant changes regarding rehabilitation services for the blind. The only change made was to one position in information technology which would be paid from the Administrative Services budget with the individual providing the specialized technological support for adaptive equipment to this division. Mike Fester stated that the procedural changes are continuing with the resultant streamlining of services to the client population. There are some changes in the Medicaid program which may result in a sudden increase in requested services from prevention of blindness programs. The Health Department has indicated that they have a limited budget and will be working with this service agency. The personnel requirements of this agency will be submitted every two weeks and reviewed as a critical issue. Currently there are five (5) vacant positions in Rehabilitation Services for the Blind – Rehabilitation Counselor for the Blind in Jefferson City and Kansas City South Office.

Mike Fester announced that he would be convening a meeting of some rehabilitation instructors from various regions on the subject of Blind Services to the Elderly to review services and cost factors.

Gary Sherman is the new Director for Social Services. Social Service agencies that would like to meet with the new Director should extend personal invitations to him for the purpose of introducing themselves, their services and their communities. Mike Fester has invited Mr. Sherman to the August meeting in Kansas City.

The meeting was adjourned.

**Rehabilitation Services for the Blind Council  
Public Forum**

**Thursday, May 12, 2005**

The Public Forum started at 7:00 p.m. with Lawrence Luck presiding. In addition to Mr. Luck, the following Council members were in attendance:

<b>Ruby Polk</b>	<b>National Federation for the Blind</b>
<b>Brian Wekamp</b>	<b>National Federation for the Blind</b>
<b>Debbi Head</b>	<b>Inclusion Coordinator</b>
<b>Beverly Kaskadden</b>	<b>Consumer</b>
<b>James Pelfrey</b>	<b>Housing Advocacy Coordinator – Paraquad</b>
<b>Clay Berry</b>	<b>Director of Education &amp; Information AlphaPointe Services for the Blind</b>
<b>Donna Borgmeyer</b>	<b>Governor’s Council on Disability</b>
<b>Ceil Callahan</b>	<b>Missouri Protection &amp; Advocacy Services</b>
<b>James Sucharski</b>	<b>Superintendent, Missouri School for the Blind</b>
<b>Bill Burris</b>	<b>President, Ozark Independent Living Center</b>
<b>Mike Fester</b>	<b>Missouri Rehabilitation Services for the Blind - Director of Rehabilitation</b>
<b>Mike Merrick</b>	<b>Missouri Rehabilitation Services for the Blind – State Office</b>
<b>Mark Laird</b>	<b>Assistant Deputy Director</b>
<b>Daniel Nellis</b>	<b>Rehabilitation Services Council Executive Director</b>

**Q. How does Rehabilitation Services for the Blind monitor equipment in client homes to prevent misuse?**

**A. There is no way to track equipment after cases are closed. If the consumer finds employment, the equipment is turned over to them.**

**Ownership agreements are required only if the value of the equipment is over \$500.**

- Q. Are Braille writers being checked on for active use and will the agency reclaim the equipment if it is not being used?**
- A. Generally there is no monitoring of the Braille equipment and its use. It is assumed that the equipment is being used. With regard to recovering equipment, it depends on the specific equipment and the cost of recovering it.**
- Q. Does software have to be bid on?**
- A. If the value of the software exceeds \$3000, three bids are required. Anyone interested in being considered a bidder needs to register with the Secretary of State and contact their district office to let them know that they are suppliers.**

**There were several expressions of gratitude to Rehabilitation Services for the Blind for its services and the benefits to consumers. A number of these clients specifically thanked their counselor Ray Schaeffer.**

**A member of the public stated that he was pleased with the improved relationship between Rehabilitation Services for the Blind and the Lighthouse. The question was asked if he was employed by the Lighthouse and he affirmed that he was.**

- Q. Are there any plans to coordinate groups to advocate against abolishing regional offices?**
- A. Federal legislation will result in the closure of regional offices by September 1, 2005. This may mean reorganization without specialized services for the blind and merger with other services. There may be some advocacy on the parts of organizations on the parts of organizations such as the National Federation of the Blind and the American Council for the Blind. We think that these two groups are opposing the closure of regional Rehabilitation Services Administrative offices and other local organizations should lend their support if they agree.**
- Q. Are proposed federal staff cuts definite?**
- A. Yes. The proposed cuts are definite and are beginning to take place in the field.**

**Q. Will there continue to be matching funds?**

**A. It is thought that at this time serious consideration is being given to Block grant awards. This will mean that the current availability of the Blind Pension Fund as a matching component will not be allowed because of the dedicated nature of this fund.**

**Statement: I would like Rehabilitation Services for the Blind to have more job development specialists.**

**Response: At this time, there are no plans to hire additional job development specialists. We presently have one job specialist serving all of Eastern Missouri and Brenda Kennedy is working with a task force to set up contracts for employment with national companies.**

**Q. If vocational rehabilitation is disbanded, what will replace it?**

**A. The federal government is currently in the process of disbanding the regional Rehabilitation Services Administrative offices. The changes are being made and will be totally in effect by the end of September. It is thought that there may be block grants awarded to the states to purchase the services for rehabilitation.**

**A parent of a blind youth asked if there is a listing of jobs which the blind can perform (who makes the decision on the vocational direction of the client?)**

**The response was that there is no occupational register that provides indications of what jobs are currently being performed by the blind/visually impaired. There may a register available through the National Federation of the Blind but Missouri does not maintain a registry.**

**(Who makes the decision on the vocational direction of the client?)**

**The choice of an occupation is a decision process that results in identifying a target goal agreed to by the counselor and the client. This process takes into consideration the client's interests, abilities, and the technological requirements that may be needed.**

**One of the people indicated that there is a high unemployment rate among the blind/visually impaired population. He thought that it was somewhere around 70%.**

**It was reported that the figure was closer to 75% unemployment. This is a result of the need to overcome society's reluctance to hire blind/visually impaired individuals.**

**A blind and deaf customer asked if there is a registry of occupations for the blind and deaf.**

**It is thought that the Helen Keller Foundation maintains a register. Most, if not all, of the counselors are aware of this and work closely with this organization**